

*Meditations and Prayers from the  
Ascension to the end of June  
and some Feasts of that month*



*For use at home*

These reflections and meditations will lead us from the Feast of the Ascension, through Pentecost, the Most Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi, through those Feasts which we usually observe with such enthusiasm. We shall be missing our outdoor Procession for Corpus Christi this year and all those changes and chances and musical treats. I hope this will help us to focus on the meaning of what we are missing! Pentecost brings the season of Easter to its triumphant conclusion and it marks the next stage of God's work as the Church begins. The Feasts which follow, each in a different way, help us to think more deeply about some aspects of those events which we have already celebrated during Holy Week. Corpus Christi is actually a reflection on what Jesus gives us at the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday; the Sacred Heart offers us the love which he shows us on the Cross on Good Friday; the Most Holy Trinity is a celebration of how God reveals himself to us by the whole of his redeeming work.

As with our last booklet, I am very grateful to Fr Beswick for his enthusiasm and for writing four of these meditations. Please use this booklet in whatever way you find the most helpful. Do not simply read through it all at once and then put it to one side. Choose one theme and a particular picture and then let your own thoughts and reflections lead you on, as well as what is written here. Then use those thoughts in a time of prayer.

*You may find it helpful to have a crucifix with you or to light a candle. This is an opening prayer you might care to use:*

In the name of the Father + and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

O Holy Spirit of God, you purify our hearts and minds, comforting us when we are in sorrow, leading us when we have gone astray, kindling our hearts when they are cold, reconciling them when they are troubled, and enriching us with your many gifts: come to us and, day by day, increase the gifts you have granted us; so that in your light we may pass through the shadows of this world to the glory where you dwell eternally, with the Father and the Son, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

# 1 THE ASCENSION OF JESUS INTO HEAVEN



*So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they*

*were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away; and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

The Ascension, properly and helpfully described in the Liturgy as the 'Glorious Ascension', is that moment when the bringing together of heaven and earth is completed. It is the consummation of God's love for us in the gift of his Son. It was established through the conception and birth of the Saviour, when the Word of God "leaped down from heaven" and was born of Mary. Now, at the end of thirty-three years, it is finished, or rather, it is all about to begin... The Ascension of the Lord ends that chapter of our salvation story when men and women and children were able to come into the near presence of the living humanity of Jesus Christ: he had dwelt among them, in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, in Galilee, in Jerusalem and in so many other places, sharing their daily lives and teaching, healing and loving them. They had shared meals, walks, times of prayer and teaching. They had seen him weep and they had seen the dust of Calvary turned to mud by the shedding of his blood. In order for the next chapter to begin it was necessary for this chapter to close: through the outpouring of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, Jesus would be known throughout the world, not just within a few square miles of Palestine.

Like so much of the mystery of God, it is very hard for artists to depict that which we cannot easily describe. How does a person 'ascend' from earth to heaven? How do heaven and earth meet? How is earth lifted up to heaven and heaven brought down to earth? Scripture simply tells us that "a cloud took him from their sight". So, we end up with wonderful illustrations, such as the picture above, in which swirling clouds, apostles and the heavenly host combine to produce a scene which can end up being evocative of that exhilarating moment in a pantomime when one of the

characters is spectacularly whisked off the stage and up to ‘the gods’ by means of a cunning combination of wires, harnesses and pulleys. Or we simply end up with a pair of feet disappearing into a cloud, such as we see in the Shrine Church at Walsingham and in many of the medieval illuminations, such as the one below. Both are worthy and valiant human attempts to describe the indescribable: we cannot fully know or understand the mechanics and physics of this mystery, any more than we can fully grasp so much else in the Catholic Faith. So, we are once again required to take it on trust and as we do so God will lead us along. The landscape changes around us and we soon forget what it was to worry about our primitive and early concerns. God leads us onwards, as S. Augustine says in one of his Commentaries on the Psalms, by being “both beautiful and yet absent”: his beauty leads us and draws us to him, and yet as we arrive we discover there is still a way to go. We soon forget our setting out at the beginning of the journey. The Ascension marks the beginning of the life of Faith for the first Christians, as they prepared for the establishing of the Church at Pentecost. In the Ascensiontide prayer below we ask that God will send us the gift of his Spirit that we too, one day, might be with his Son in heaven.

*O GOD the King of glory, who hast exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph unto thy kingdom in heaven: We beseech thee, leave us not comfortless; but send to us thine Holy Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.*



## 2. THE DAY OF PENTECOST



*When Pentecost day came round, the apostles had all met in one room, when suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the*

*entire house in which they were sitting: and something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak foreign languages as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech. Now there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at the sound they all assembled, each one bewildered to hear these men speaking his own language. They were amazed and astonished, 'Surely', they said, 'all these men speaking are Galileans? How does it happen that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and the parts of Libya round Cyrene: as well as visitors from Rome, Jews and proselytes alike, Cretans and Arabs: we hear them preaching in our own language about the marvels of God.'*

Jerusalem was full for the day of Pentecost, with people from many different nations and cultures, but the Apostles were still in hiding: they were frightened by the prospect of suffering and death, they had no courage to tell other people what they had seen and heard. This was the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after the Passover which was a sort of Jewish harvest festival, a thanksgiving for the fruits of the earth. But whilst they were praying with Mary in that upper room, something happened that they could not properly explain. The room was filled with a powerful wind and tongues of fire appeared. All that is presented to us very dramatically in this painting by Louis Galloche: he was born in 1670 and had originally been a Seminarian in Paris, training for the priesthood, until found that he preferred his freedom. So at the age of 20 he became an artist. He produced various portraits for Louis XIV at Versailles, a number of pictures of classical legends but also many devotional paintings for the local Churches. What I like in this picture is the sense of movement, of amazement, of receiving something which is far greater than anything they could ever have imagined: the tongues of fire have not quite yet landed!

There were two signs of what was happening - wind and fire. The tempest in the Old Testament is seen as a sign of God's power, over which we have no control: we are still used to how much damage storms of wind can do! But that strong driving wind is also what enables us to live on this planet, which drives away the pollution, which brings the changes in the weather, which brings us life. The wind that filled that house is the spiritual

wind which brings us the life of God, which drives away all the pollutants that fill our lives. Fire also is one of those primal elements of the world which we often cannot control: it too can hurt and destroy, can remind us that we are not ultimately in charge of this world. Moses hears the voice of God as he goes to look at the bush which is on fire but not being burned up; Our Lord had said to the Apostles, *'I have come to cast fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled'*. So those Apostles receive this divine flame of the Holy Spirit and carry it to the ends of the earth. Pope Benedict writes: *'How different is the fire of Christ, spread by the Church, compared to those lit by the dictators of every epoch, of last century too, who leave a scorched earth behind them. The fire of the Holy Spirit is that of a flame which burns but does not destroy, that, in burning, brings forth the better and truer part of man, as in a fusion it makes his interior form emerge, his vocation to truth and to love.'*

When those Apostles came spilling out of the room and speaking about what they had seen and heard, the Holy Spirit was at work not only in them but in all those who heard them: the crowds found that they could understand them in their own language. The list given to us by S. Luke includes all the known world: it goes across cultural and religious barriers (Jews and proselytes); it unites the East with the West, islands and land (Cretans and Arabs). The work of the Holy Spirit enables each to express himself in his own way, to be truly one in Christ. The Church, which is born on this day, is to be truly Catholic and Universal, a home in which everyone can find a place. And the effect of the divine fire is to change us and help us to find our true self. Origen, in one of his homilies on Jeremiah, quotes a saying of Jesus which is not in the Gospels, 'Whoever is near me, is near the fire'. It may be authentic. In Christ is the fulness of God; and we are frightened of getting too near that fire – we prefer to stay as we are, in case we are burned. There is the fear that coming too near Jesus Christ robs us of our freedom, of certain experiences, of part of ourselves. Whereas in fact in losing something we gain ourselves and we are able to grow. We find ourselves more fully. It is my prayer that we shall manage to do that, here and now, even in our isolation.

*O Holy Spirit, open my eyes, that I may see the truth. Strengthen my heart, that I may face the truth. Enlighten my mind, that may understand the truth. Make resolute my will that I may obey the truth. This I ask of you, O Spirit of Truth. Amen.*



### 3. THE MOST HOLY TRINITY



*Jesus said to Nicodemus: 'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.'*

*Jesus said to his disciples: 'I still have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now. But when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learnt: and he will tell you of the things to come. He will glorify me since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine. Everything the Father has is mine; that is why I said: All he tells you will be taken from what is mine.'*

These two passages come from the ministry of Jesus, one at the beginning when he is trying to instruct some of his disciples, laying the foundations for the development of their faith and understanding, and the other from what he says to the Apostles after the Last Supper, before he goes out to face his own suffering and death. They remind us that our approach to God, our faith in him, our understanding of how he is at work, comes to us through Jesus. In him, God has become visible; and yet he is still a mystery. The more we explore that mystery, the more there is still to be discovered and known. On the first Sunday after the end of Eastertide, we celebrate the Feast of God as he has revealed himself to us. Our picture comes from the hand of Hendrick van Balen, born in Antwerp in 1572. At the age of 17 he was already famous as a painter and liked to produce small allegorical scenes from Classical mythology. But at the age of 23 he travelled around Italy for seven years and on his return painted much larger religious works for altars. So it is that in 1620 he painted a picture of God! It is full of movement and light: the Father and the Son are both making physical contact with the world and Jesus shows us the marks of his suffering.

God is in contact with the world, he loves the world: that, indeed, is why anything exists at all because God is love. So Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one because God is love and love is an absolute life-giving force. Through Jesus we come to know the uncreated Father who has existed since before the beginning of time; through him we receive the Holy Spirit, that active power of God who is at work in us and throughout the Church

and the world. God does not live in isolation having created the world, but constantly gives life to his creation. The more we look at the vastness of the universe, the more closely we examine the smallest particles of matter, the more we see the work of God. As we contemplate that reality, our only response can be to worship and to adore. And as we worship, we come to know that we live in a relationship with God – it is his love that makes us happy because as humans we live to love and to be loved.

God gives his Son to the world to be born for us, to live for us, to heal and forgive us. Because of that love, the Son gives his life for us. On the cross and through his rising from the dead and return to glory, he brings us to share in eternal life, a life given to us through the Holy Spirit. So at each stage of this self-offering, the Holy Trinity is present; God is giving so that we can receive. When we approach that life, when we come to share in it, we call upon that Trinity, as at the beginning and the end of Mass, as when we are baptised into the Name of God.

We as human beings cannot live in isolation. That is a truth which has come home to us all too clearly during the ‘lockdown’ caused by the virus. We are reminded how much we miss those human contacts, the need to see and to touch, the company we enjoy, the sharing of experiences, of joys and sorrows. We took it all for granted and we do not notice how much we need it until it is gone. We had perhaps thought that the odd message or text, the next ‘post’ on social media would be enough, but now we know differently. Let us never forget that lesson. Let us also not forget that all human beings are children of God and therefore are brothers and sisters of one another, sharing that communion of love and care for one another which we find in the nature of God.

*God our Father, who by sending into the world the Word of truth and the Spirit to make us holy, have made known to us your wondrous mystery, grant, we pray, that in professing the true faith, we may glorify the Trinity, reigning in eternal glory, and adore your Unity, powerful in majesty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

## 4. CORPUS ET SANGUIS CHRISTI



*This is what I received from the Lord and in turn passed on to you: that on the same night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it and broke it, and he said, ‘This is my Body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.’ In the same way he took the cup after supper and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my Blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.’ Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup you are proclaiming his death.*

*Jesus said to the Jews, ‘Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him.’*

The earliest written account we have of what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper is not in the Gospels but in S. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians quoted above: he wrote it in about A.D. 53. He writes about it because he wants to regulate the way in which they were celebrating the Mass in Corinth at that time. This was already a part of the worship of the Church,

a command given to the Apostles by the Lord. It is the way that he continued to be with them, feeding them with his Risen Body and Blood, with his very life. But the original background of this meal is that his death is about to happen. By giving us this he makes us sharers in that offering of himself, of his Body and Blood, offered on the Cross so that we can live, both now and the beyond our death. When those gifts on the altar have been transformed, we say, 'The mystery of faith: We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection, until you come again'. We are speaking of his death, we are showing our belief that he is alive again not in words, but in what we do. This is absolutely basic to our daily lives as Christians, it is *the Way* in which we receive the benefit of all that he has done for us, here and now. Benedict XVI writes, '*He offers in anticipation the life that will be taken from him and in this way transforms his violent death into a free act of giving himself for others and to others*'.

It was so that we could reflect on this, and adore this Risen Christ with all our heart that the feast of Corpus Christi was instituted in 1264. In this wonderful picture by Jules Breton from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century we see a Corpus Christi Procession. The girls cast flower petals to make a path for Jesus, the servers surround the Monstrance and the people walk behind, following Jesus who is with us. Adoration is the way in which we come to realise that we would not exist at all without God, and that he gives us himself completely to us in love. *Ad-oratio* is literally a 'kiss' the giving and receiving of love in all its fulness: it changes us.

Without the Eucharist the Church quite simply would not exist. This daily offering makes a human community into a communion which brings us together as the people of God. It supports us in our weakness and enables us to grow to become like Christ. We are what we eat. Jesus comes to be our food, the strength for those of us who are weary, worn out and bewildered. Even when we make our communion spiritually, which at best is a poor substitute forced on most of us at the moment, we receive that life and the strength to carry on. We often forget that we carry the Blessed Sacrament in ourselves when we leave the Church after Mass. Jesus is with us and, if we let him, he will change the quality of what we can do for others. The first actual 'procession' of the body of Jesus is not in the 13<sup>th</sup>

century: it when Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth carrying with her in her womb the body of God's Son.

*Lord Jesus, I believe and trust in your presence on the Altar. I entrust my life to you, I adore you; by your Holy Spirit, warm my cold heart which seeks comfort elsewhere. Accept my faith, hope and love and, through the power of your sacred presence, make up for what is lacking, so that I may know, trust and serve you, this day and always. Amen.*

## 5. THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS



*It was Preparation Day, and to prevent the bodies remaining on the cross during the sabbath, since that sabbath was a day of special solemnity, the Jews asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken away. Consequently the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with him and then of the other. When they came to Jesus, they found he was already dead, and so instead of breaking his legs one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance, and immediately there came out blood and water. This is the evidence of one who saw it - trustworthy evidence and he knows he speaks the truth – and he gives it that you may believe as well.*

*The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us. We were still helpless when at his appointed moment Christ died for sinful men. What proves that God is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.*

*Out of his infinite glory may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fulness of God.*

We do not need to be persuaded that the heart is a symbol of feeling and of love. We ‘love with all our heart’, we are ‘heartbroken’, we ‘put our heart and soul’ into what we are doing. It is much more than just an organ that keeps us alive. So devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is there in the Bible. It was developed through the writings of the early Church and in the Benedictine Order, through S. Gertrude and S. Mechtilde. But it remained very much a private devotion until S. Francis de Sales founded the Order of the Visitation in 1611: he gave it to them as their Coat of Arms, to remind them of their duty to love in return for love. And later that century, S. Margaret Mary, a Visitation nun at Paray le Monial, was granted a series of visions in which Jesus spoke to her about his Heart and encouraged her to talk to others about this sign. S. Margaret Mary in her visions actually only saw the Heart, not the whole figure of Jesus. She drew a picture of what she saw, which you will find just below. Jesus entrusted to her a series of promises which he would make to those who used this devotion in their prayers. So the Feast of the Sacred Heart, on the Friday after Corpus Christi, came into being.



But since then, in devotional pictures and Shrines, this is not usually a ‘disembodied’ heart. The picture with which we began is one of the most beautiful images I know: it is by Batoni and is in the Church of the Gesu in Rome. Jesus is offering us his Heart, which is on fire with his love, which has been wounded by the soldier’s spear and which ‘wears’ the crown of thorns.

The root of the devotion is in the opening of the side of Jesus with the soldier’s lance. We read that passage from S. John’s Gospel every Good Friday and S. John is very specific about the details of what happened – *‘this is the evidence of one who saw it’*. God took on a body and a heart; that heart was pierced on the Cross and from it flowed blood and water, signs of the life and love we receive from Jesus. The water is that of our baptism, by which we receive new life from God; the blood is a sign of the Mass, which feeds us with that life every day – *‘this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant’*. All this means that we must respond in love: God is not offering us a distant hope – he gives us himself, his very being. The source and basis of all our prayers is that we know God loved us first, before we ever began to think about him.

In our second quotation above, from S. Paul’s letter to the Romans, he leads us on to understand that the love which comes from God creates for each of us a personal relationship with him. Like all close relationships,



that love will sometimes be strained and tested on our part. It becomes more distant if we are conscious of saying or doing something which obviously goes against the love of God. It is tested by our experience of suffering and sickness. Every day, there are minor sins and failings, but every so often we realise that we have created a much bigger barrier to love. God's forgiveness is always there for the asking, because *Christ has died for us while we were still sinners*. That Heart, which is on fire with love, is encircled with the Crown of Thorns. He shares those sufferings.

But that love, which is at work in us, means that even now we are sharing in the life of heaven. Love grows by the exercise of love; love increases when it is shared. In the Letter to the Ephesians, S. Paul prays that our hidden self will grow strong. It is by using our love that we shall find more resources from God and come to understand what he is calling us to do. At every stage of life, we shall become stronger the more we put that love into action. 'Good works' are not a substitute for faith or for prayer: they flow naturally from the relationship we have with God. To quote Benedict XVI again: *'If in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be "devout" and to perform my "religious duties", then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely "proper", but loveless. Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well.'* We do this with 'all the saints': we have a lot to learn from the examples of their lives on earth, but they continue to inspire and lead us and support us by their prayers for us in heaven. And so we shall come at length to be *'filled with the utter fulness of God'*.

*Sacred Heart of Jesus, filled with infinite love, broken by my ingratitude, pierced by my sins, yet loving me still, accept the consecration which I make to you of all that I am and all that I have. Take every faculty of my soul and body and draw me, day by day, nearer to your sacred side. There may I learn how to love; let your love imprint your image so deeply on me that I will never forget you or be separated from you. Make me firm and steadfast in good works so that I may bear witness to your love. May my name be written in your heart, in whom I find all my happiness and glory, and may I live and die in your service. Amen.*

## 6. S. BARNABAS, 11 JUNE



*Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad; and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a large company was added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church, and taught a large company of people; and in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians.*

*Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world; and this took place in the days of Claudius. And the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts, Chapter 11)*

S. Barnabas was nothing less than the *midwife* of the ministry of S. Paul, and thus we owe him a great debt. It was S. Paul who made sense of the teachings of the Apostles and, most importantly, of the consequences of those teachings for the manner of life of the first Christians. He worked out, in many and various ways, what ‘being a Christian’ meant for the day to day life of the believer. This teaching is contained in his Letters, and is as relevant today as it was then. Paul had, of course, been a keen persecutor of the first Christians, even looking after the coats of those who stoned S. Stephen to death: and then he was converted. The Christians were rightly very wary of this ‘born-again’ Christian and it was only through the efforts of S. Barnabas to reconcile the two parties that Paul was accepted and trusted. It was through S. Barnabas’ ability to see the *goodness and faithfulness* in S. Paul that the great work of S. Paul’s ministry unfolded. Barnabas, by God’s grace, brought out the best in Paul.

S. Barnabas is described by S. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, as “a good man, full of faith and the Holy Spirit”. He was good and so could recognize the good in others. He saw what was good in S. Paul and worked with it. This is a good approach to take more generally in our lives: we are seldom able to agree with others about everything (especially in Church life!) but we can seek out that which is good and ‘of God’ in others and encourage it to flourish.

In the picture above, full of dramatic detail, Paul and Barnabas are on one of their missionary journeys in a town called Lystra. A crippled man has just been healed (you can see his abandoned crutches in the bottom left corner of the painting) and the locals, led by the pagan priest (busy at his exotic outdoor altar, with various animals being prepared for sacrifice....), are amazed by the healing and thus convinced that the gods have come down from heaven to earth. Barnabas and Paul are horrified! They do their

best to explain to the locals that this is simply the work of the true and living God, whom they serve and of whom they preach.

Barnabas itself is a name which means ‘*Son of Consolation*’ or ‘*Son of Encouragement*’: the gift of S. Barnabas to the Church is that of setting the example of *encouragement*. There is good to be found in all of us but, like the seeds in a packet, even before they have been scattered on the soil, that good needs to be identified, nurtured and encouraged. As others have done this for us, so each of us has our part to play in discerning and building on the good in others. And so, by God’s grace, the Church becomes a place that brings out the best in people: that’s a place that people will want to be.

S. Barnabas was martyred in Cyprus, after being tortured with fire, and buried there with a copy of St Matthew’s Gospel by his side, which he is often shown to be carrying in icons and statues.

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for S. Barnabas and for his gifts of encouragement, goodness and faithfulness. Help us both to encourage and seek out the best in one another. As you granted gifts of the Holy Spirit to S. Barnabas, so we pray that you will give us a share in those same gifts, to the glory of your name and for the good of your Church, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*



## 7. S. JOHN BAPTIST, 24 JUNE



*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

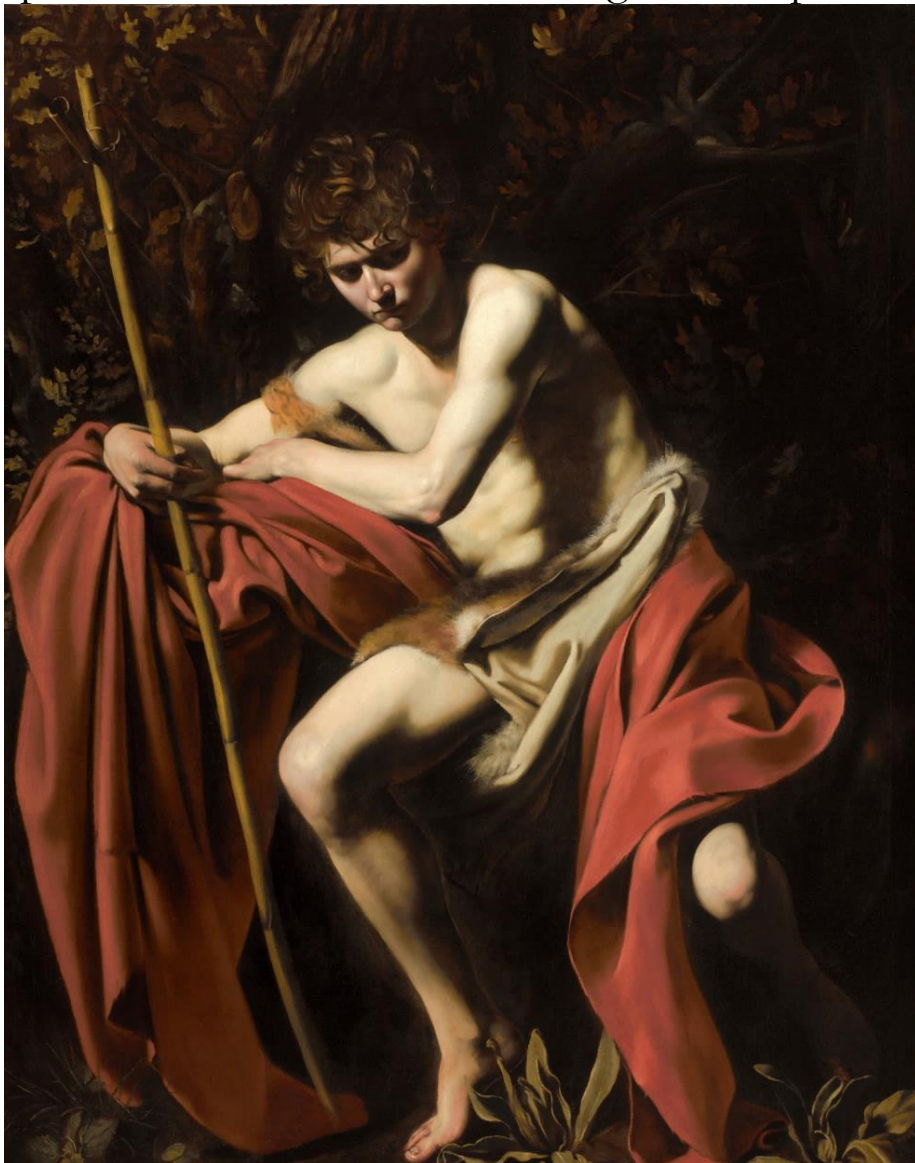
*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son with thee I am well pleased." The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.*

S. John the Baptist prepares people for the coming of Christ, identifies Christ for those who cannot see him and then shows them the way to Christ: from his first leap of joy in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, to his own preaching; from the waters of the River Jordan (as depicted for us by the painter Giotto, above) to his own martyrdom, preferring to die for the sake of truth rather than to compromise. Both Giotto and Caravaggio (below) have taken the trouble to show John wearing the garment made from camel hair, in keeping with the descriptions in the Bible. Giotto shows him to be doing what John does best: avoiding centre-stage himself at the same time as ensuring that this position is rightly occupied by God. The Father reaches down from heaven at the same moment that John is reaching out his hand in baptism. This reminds us that, most of the time, God invites us to be a part of what he is doing: he directs, encourages, gives confidence. However, we still have an essential (but seldom solo) part to play in the success or failure of the work of the Gospel in a particular place and time. It is not for us to speculate how things would have unfolded had John been unwilling to play his part, any more than we should speculate how things would have been if Mary had withheld her “Be it unto me according to thy word”: all we know is that they both said yes! It may seem, with the benefit of hindsight, that the instructions to all the saints were crystal clear, but it is amazing how personal doubts and whispered hesitations from others can rob us of our good intentions, or at least make us postpone them....It is likely that the saints were hampered in many of the same ways as we are: John, as shown by Caravaggio, looks as though he may well be grappling with deep inner thoughts and questions, as a young man preparing for what lay ahead. So he helps us to deal with our own inner thoughts, questions and doubts today.

Firstly he helps us to get ready by “*preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*”. That was how he prepared the first hearers of the Good News and it is a tried and tested formula that has lost none of its transforming power down the ages. The impact of human sin in our lives and communities is as old as Adam, even if it takes on a different guise from generation to generation. John calls us to begin to be honest about the roots of sin in our own hearts and lives, as we make ready to welcome Christ. This work of ‘getting ready’ is begun at our baptism and continued in our examination of conscience and confession.

Secondly, John identifies Christ for us, tells us where he is: *“Behold the Lamb of God!”* in other words, “He’s over there!”. We know where to find him today, if we have the self-honesty and perseverance to make the journey: in Holy Sacrament and in Holy Scripture, in prayer and in works of charity-whatever form these latter may take.

Thirdly, John shows us the way to Christ: the simple daily practise of his words *“He must increase and I must decrease”* or to put it another way: *“Self upon the cross and Christ upon the throne.”* The world around us and the values with which we are bombarded (which are usually “It’s all about me”, just dressed up one way or another) have little time for the way of John Baptist: but his way is the way that leads us to Christ. John is enigmatic, as are so many of the saints, and together they confound the expectations of the unbelieving world. The picture by Caravaggio gives us a rare and beautiful glimpse into the cost of confounding these expectations.



*As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,*

*'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,  
who shall prepare thy way before thee.'*

*Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates,<sup>7</sup> 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."*

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for the life and faithful witness of your servant John. Help us to take seriously the presence of sin in our own lives and to heed his call to repentance. Grant us a share in his spirit of readiness to stand up for the sake of the truth, whatever the cost, and through our witness to direct others towards your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*





## 8. S. PETER AND S. PAUL, 29 JUNE



*The Crucifixion of St Peter by Caravaggio, (1571-1610)*

*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love*

me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, "Follow me."

S. Peter and S. Paul are the two great foundation-stones of Holy Church, with such unpromising beginnings that they offer hope to all of us! Peter began life as a fisherman and was told by the Lord that one day he would no longer be a *fisherman* but a *fisher of men*. During the years of the Lord's public ministry, Peter distinguished himself not only by being somewhat slow on the uptake but also by his unerring ability to spot the wrong end of a stick and seize it with both hands. And he was unreliable: think of the threefold denial of Christ, before the cock crowed, and the ensuing tears, which must have made an indelible mark on his soul: a mark that was made bearable by the greater mark of the Lord's love. He ended his days as the Shepherd of the first Christians and was martyred in Rome on an upside-down cross. He is known as the 'key-bearer' because he received the promise of Jesus that "whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This reminds us that the life and discipline of the earthly Church has heavenly consequences.

Paul was a Jew, a Pharisee and a Roman Citizen. He made his living as a tent-maker and whatever he did in life, he did it with zeal and passion. He was convinced of the error of the claims of the first Christians and took his part in persecuting them, even to the extent of watching the coats of those who were stoning S. Stephen to death. He underwent his famous and dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus and then rolled up his sleeves and got stuck in to the work of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His missionary journeys are recorded in colourful detail in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

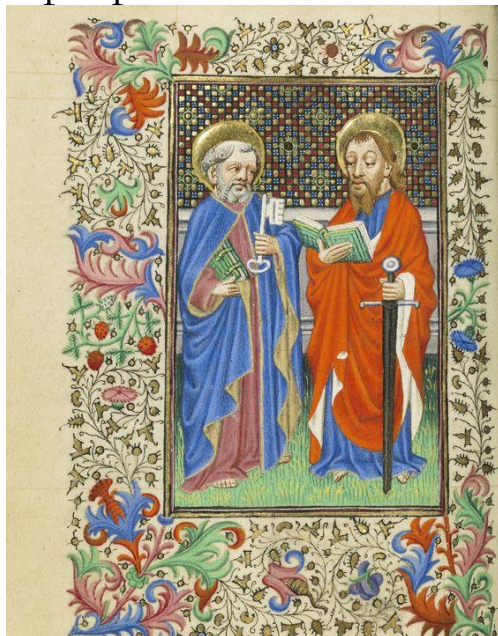
Both Peter and Paul had good reason to hang their respective heads in shame for the mess they had respectively made of their relationship with God: and yet, in both of them, the love of God overcame the shame of their mistakes and he achieved wonderful things through them. Their short sermons in *Acts* are a useful and helpful refresher course for Christians of all stages of life!

Peter reminds us of the importance of picking ourselves up again after the umpteenth time we have got it wrong; Paul reminds us of the importance of being whole-hearted in our Christian devotion: you can't be *half* a Christian.

A hymn from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century helps us to understand their dual importance for Christians in every age:

*Twin olive branches, pouring oil of gladness forth,  
Your prayers shall aid us, that for all our little worth,  
Believing, hoping, loving, we for whom ye plead,  
This body dying, may attain to life indeed.*

The 'olive branches' image is resonant of the various sacramental uses of olive oil in the ministry of the Church, blessed each year by the Bishop at his Chrism Mass in Holy Week. Through the prayers, teaching and example of S. Peter and S. Paul, God continues to pour out abundant riches and blessing on his people.





*The Conversion of St Paul by Caravaggio (1571-1610)*

*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were travelling with him stood speechless,*

*hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

*Lord Jesus, you called S. Peter and S. Paul to serve you faithfully, in spite of their frailty and mistakes. Take our weaknesses and fears, our failures and our blindness of heart: purify them with the fire of your love and renew in our hearts the confidence and desire to live our lives for you alone, who live and reign with the Father and the Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

